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Career development in language services — Measures aimed at reducing excessive vacancy rates at some duty stations: elements of a system of managed assignments

Note by the Secretary-General

Summary

In the framework of a new policy for assignment of language staff, cooperation between the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services, the Office of Human Resources Management and offices away from Headquarters will be strengthened and elements of a managed assignment system based on incentives will be put in place as of 1 January 2000.

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1. On 21 April and 26 May 1999 respectively, pursuant to requests by the General Assembly in its resolutions 53/208 A and B of 18 December 1998, the Secretary-General submitted a report on career development in language services (A/53/919) and an addendum to that report (A/53/919/Add.2), entitled "Reducing excessive vacancy rates at some duty stations: the possibility of introducing a system of managed assignments".

2. At its substantive session of 1999, held from 30 August to 2 September, the Committee on Conferences took note of the above-mentioned reports of the Secretary-General and requested him to finalize by the end of the main part of the fifty-fourth session of the General Assembly concrete proposals on a system of managed assignments based on career incentives and aimed at reducing the excessive vacancy rates at some duty stations. The present note has been prepared in accordance with that request.

3. Following the session of the Committee on Conferences, consultations took place between the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services and the Office of Human Resources Management. On that basis, there was agreement on two sets of measures to alleviate the vacancy problem in language services at some duty stations away from Headquarters: the first set includes measures intended to strengthen the cooperation between the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services at Headquarters, the Office of Human Resources Management, and conference services at offices away from Headquarters to facilitate the filling of vacancies at the entry level (P-2/P-3) in those offices; the other set of measures aims at initiating a system of managed assignments based on career incentives to facilitate the filling of vacancies by experienced language staff (translators, editors and, in the case of the United Nations Office at Vienna, interpreters) at the P-3 or P-4 level.

I. Filling of vacancies at the entry level

4. As a rule, the duty stations which experience a high vacancy rate in their language services (see A/53/919/Add.2, paras. 4-6) lack the capacity to provide supplementary training to the candidates who have successfully passed the competitive examination for recruitment of language staff. As indicated in the report of the Secretary-General on career development in language services (A/53/919, para. 22), for some years, arrangements have been made for accelerated training of translators and editors at Headquarters, allowing for their placement against vacant posts at offices away from Headquarters six to eight months after their recruitment.

5. It has now been decided that copies of the background files of all successful candidates having passed a competitive examination will be sent systematically to the regional commissions, the United Nations Office at Vienna and the United Nations Office at Nairobi immediately following publication of the results of that examination, and that conference services at those duty stations will be given priority for the selection of candidates on the rosters. In consideration of the special requirements and/or language combinations needed at those duty stations, the ranking of the candidates on the roster will be disregarded in that selection process. Accelerated training at Headquarters of the candidates thus recruited against vacancies at offices away from Headquarters will continue to cover a period of six to eight months.

6. In those cases where an office away from Headquarters experiencing a high rate of vacancies is interested in recruiting one or several candidates on the roster, but only after their having received the full customary two-year supplementary training at Headquarters, these candidates will be recruited initially against vacant posts at Headquarters, with a clear understanding that they will be reassigned at the end of that training period. The acceptance of that condition will be reflected in the employment contract entered into by all new recruits which, as of 1 January 2000, will provide that staff members can be reassigned to any duty station at the discretion of the Organization.

II. Filling of vacancies with experienced language staff

7. The most difficult problem to solve in dealing with the high-vacancy situation in the language services at some duty stations has been the assignment to those duty stations of language staff at the P-3 and P-4 levels with several years of experience. As indicated earlier (A/53/919/Add.2, para. 6), calls for volunteers in the Headquarters language services to accept temporary assignments of two or three years at less-sought-after duty stations have not been successful in solving those problems. Accordingly, it has been decided that management will adopt a more proactive approach in that respect: rather than relying almost exclusively on volunteers, management will select individuals to fill vacancies using such criteria as skills, background and language combination, in full consultation with prospective receiving offices. The existence of a variety of incentives in connection with these assignments would deter those selected from considering their selection as

"unfair" and would encourage them to accept the assignment willingly.

8. The following incentive measures have been agreed upon:

- Commitment by the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services to reabsorption at Headquarters, or the United Nations Office at Geneva as the case may be, after an assignment of at least two years at a high-vacancy duty station;
- Commitment by the Department to give priority consideration to requests made by applicants with prior experience at a high-vacancy duty station for reassignment to a duty station of their choice;
- Granting preferential treatment to staff members with a record of prior assignments to high-vacancy duty stations when considering candidates of equal merit for promotion: announcements for vacancies at the P-4 and P-5 levels will thus provide that: "Preference will be given to candidates having a record of prior assignment(s) to high-vacancy duty stations";
- Requests for waivers of minimum seniority requirements for promotion to the P-4 and P-5 levels will receive special consideration when made for otherwise qualified candidates who have prior experience at a high-vacancy duty station.

9. As a measure to enforce compliance, staff members who refuse, without a valid reason, to comply with the request for reassignment will be informed that a record of that refusal will be kept in their official status file.

10. An important consideration in formulating the above measures (scheduled for implementation on 1 January 2000) has been the need to avoid granting a separate status to language staff within the Professional category. Indeed, these measures are fully compatible with the procedures currently being developed by the Office of Human Resources Management for managed assignment of Professional staff at large. Thus, in the end it was decided that some incentives initially contemplated as part of a managed assignment system for language staff, including automatically reduced seniority requirements for promotions, accelerated salary increments and the granting of home leave every 12 months, would not be retained. It is expected, however, that the fresh approach and new measures outlined in the present note will contribute to a significant improvement in the vacancy situation of language services at duty stations away from Headquarters.